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The Federal Diary

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Talks Held at State On Perilous Jobs



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Delicate, deadly serious negotiations are taking place between top State Department officials and employee representatives who want State to promise, in future, to warn workers if they face actual or potential "extraordinary danger" such as the Soviets use of radiation against the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

The Russians have been directing "low-level" radiation against key diplomatic, military and communications offices in the embassy, off-and-on, for at least 16 years. Few employees assigned to duty there knew anything about it until the story broke recently in newspapers.

The internal diplomatic negotiations at Foggy Bottom are aimed at getting a federally funded, independent study of what effects—if any—the radiation has had on any employees assigned to Moscow. Some workers who were there are now wondering if ailments, from blood disorders to emotional problems, might be related to prolonged exposure to radiation. The answer is that nobody knows.

Talks that began earlier this year are continuing between State officials and the Committee on Extraordinary Dangers, appointed by the American Foreign Service Association. It is charged with examining not only the radiation problem, but also situations involving other dangers (from terrorist threats to plans to poison embassy water in "safe" countries) which are above-and-beyond the normal hazards faced by U.S. overseas aides.

The discussions, which may be winding up soon, are in addition to talks between senior American officials and the Soviet Embassy here, and with leaders in Moscow, aimed at halting the radiation. It is believed that the radiation (which reportedly was turned off by

the Soviets when then Vice President Richard Nixon visited the embassy) is directed not at personnel but rather to listen to, or jam U.S. communications and detection equipment.

What the committee—plagued by an internal dispute within AFSA—wants is State Department guarantees of the epidemiological study, and a future promise that workers will be advised of extraordinary dangers or threats in future so they can decline assignments, or at least take precautions.